

Active reading

Active reading simply means reading something with a determination to understand and evaluate it for its relevance to your needs.

Simply reading and re-reading the material isn't an effective way to understand and learn.

Actively and critically engaging with the content can save you time. Most OU study books and websites include in-text questions and self-assessed questions. Use these as built-in cues to make your study active.

What is Critical Reading?

Reading critically does not, necessarily, mean being critical of what you read.

Both reading and **thinking critically** don't mean being '*critical*' about some idea, argument, or piece of writing - claiming that it is somehow faulty or flawed.

Critical reading means engaging in what you read by asking yourself questions such as, '*what is the author trying to say?*' or '*what is the main argument being presented?*'

Critical reading involves presenting a reasoned argument that evaluates and analyses what you have read. Being critical, therefore - in an academic sense - means advancing your understanding, not dismissing and therefore closing off learning.

To read critically is to exercise your judgement about what you are reading – that is, not taking anything you read at face value.

When reading academic material you will be faced with the author's interpretation and opinion. Different authors will, naturally, have different slants. You should always examine what you are reading critically and look for limitations, omissions, inconsistencies, oversights and arguments against what you are reading.

In academic circles, whilst you are a student, you will be expected to understand different viewpoints and make your own judgements based on what you have read.

As a critical reader you should reflect on:

- What the text says: after critically reading a piece you should be able to take notes, paraphrasing - in your own words - the key points.
- What the text describes: you should be confident that you have understood the text sufficiently to be able to use your own examples and compare and contrast with other writing on the subject in hand.
- Interpretation of the text: this means that you should be able to fully analyse the text and state a meaning for the text as a whole.

Critical reading means being able to reflect on what a text says, what it describes and what it means by scrutinising the style and structure of the writing, the language used as well as the content.

Critical Thinking is an Extension of Critical Reading

Thinking critically, in the academic sense, involves being open-minded - using judgement and discipline to process what you are learning about without letting your personal bias or opinion detract from the arguments.

Critical thinking involves being rational and aware of your own feelings on the subject – being able to reorganise your thoughts, prior knowledge and understanding to accommodate new ideas or viewpoints.

Critical reading and critical thinking are therefore the very foundations of true learning and personal development

Developing a Reading Strategy

You will, in formal learning situations, be required to read and critically think about a lot of information from different sources.

It is important therefore, that you not only learn to read critically but also efficiently.

The first step to efficient reading is to become selective.

If you cannot read all of the books on a recommended reading list, you need to find a way of selecting the best texts for you. To start with, you need to know what you are looking for.

You can then examine the contents page and/or index of a book or journal to ascertain whether a chapter or article is worth pursuing further.

Once you have selected a suitable piece the next step is to speed-read.

Speed reading is also often referred to as skim-reading or scanning. Once you have identified a relevant piece of text, like a chapter in a book, you should scan the first few sentences of each paragraph to gain an overall impression of subject areas it covers. Scan-reading essentially means that you know what you are looking for, you identify the chapters or sections most relevant to you and ignore the rest.

When you speed-read you are not aiming to gain a full understanding of the arguments or topics raised in the text. It is simply a way of determining what the text is about.

When you find a relevant or interesting section you will need to slow your reading speed dramatically, allowing you to gain a more in-depth understanding of the arguments raised.

Even when you slow your reading down it may well be necessary to read passages several times to gain a full understanding.

See also: [Speed-Reading for Professionals](#).

Following SQ3R

SQ3R is a well-known strategy for reading. SQ3R can be applied to a whole range of reading purposes as it is flexible and takes into account the need to change reading speeds.

SQ3R is an acronym and stands for:

- Survey
- Question
- Read
- Recall
- Review

Survey

This relates to speed-reading, scanning and skimming the text. At this initial stage you will be attempting to gain the general gist of the material in question.

Question

It is important that, before you begin to read, you have a question or set of questions that will guide you - why am I reading this? When you have a purpose to your reading you want to learn and retain certain information. Having questions changes reading from a passive to an active pursuit. Examples of possible questions include:

- *What do I already know about this subject?*
- *How does this chapter relate to the assignment question?*
- *How can I relate what I read to my own experiences?*

Read

Now you will be ready for the main activity of reading. This involves careful consideration of the meaning of what the author is trying to convey and involves being critical as well as active.

Recall

Regardless of how interesting an article or chapter is, unless you make a concerted effort to recall what you have just read, you will forget a lot of the important points. Recalling from time to time allows you to focus upon the main points – which in turn aids concentration. Recalling gives you the chance to think about and assimilate what you have just read, keeping you active. A significant element in being active is to write down, in your own words, the key points.

Review

The final step is to review the material that you have recalled in your notes. Did you understand the main principles of the argument? Did you identify all the main points? Are there any gaps? Do not take for granted that you have recalled everything you need correctly – review the text again to make sure and clarify.